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The People in Between

By Rabbi Robert J. Marx

Every generation provides terrifying examples of how the Jewish community plays a role that is almost predestined, that is almost always tragic, and that is invariably enacted as if the actors were unaware of the tragicomic parts that have been assigned to them.

Several years ago I was led to seek a new definition of the position of the Jewish community, one that would account for the ways in which Jews historically are trapped into positions which they neither control nor understand. The Jewish community, I concluded, was truly interstitial, truly located between the parts of the social structure of western societies. Neither a part of the masses nor of the power structure, Jews were uniquely positioned so that they fulfilled certain vital yet dispensable functions. They discovered that they were totally dispensable in the society in which they lived. To affirm interstitiality is to do more than merely to modernize the traditional "scapegoat" theory of Jewish history. Interstitiality may be negative, or it may be positive. It may open a path to the gas chamber or it may lead to prophetic heights that enable the Jewish people to rise above parochialism or nationalism.

The Jewish community must understand interstitiality, must understand it completely and clearly, and then begin to act on the basis of that understanding. We must first recognize that there are forces at work in every diaspora community that would hinder us from understanding the interstitial role and from acting on it once we comprehend it.

When we say that Jews are "caught" between the parts, we are stating a truth that historically has been both simple and negative. We are saying that Jews have allowed themselves to be placed in a position that is beyond their control. It is easy to recognize this pattern when we examine the history of the Jews in the Middle Ages, a time when basic limitations were placed upon them in terms of their ability to own land, sell new merchandise, and move freely from community to community. While being deprived of these privileges, Jews nevertheless filled an economic vacuum. They stimulated trade and commerce. Through international connections, they brought with them capital, and they loaned money to kings and bishops.

The interstitial nature of this role becomes apparent when we realize that the Jews fulfilled a necessary social function. They did not just happen to settle in Spain or Poland or Germany. Propelled by persecution and impelled by the dual prospect of freedom and opportunity, Jews always remained the outsiders in European society. As a result of their trade connections, their knowledge, and the diversity of their skills, their presence became not only desirable but also frequently necessary.

Writing in 1673, Louis XIV's finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, was able to suggest that the Jews brought with them economic advantages so significant that to want to expel them was unthinkable. "What might not be of advantage to the particular inhabitants of Marsalles is of great importance to the kingdom as a whole. The establishment of the Jews has never been forbidden by commercial consideration, because business generally increases wherever they are, but only by religion. Since, at the moment, commerce is the only issue, there is no reason to pay any attention to the arguments which have been advanced to you against the Jews."¹

It is amazing to see how repeatedly and conveniently Western civilizations suppressed theological anti-Semitism as they rationalized their need for Jews in terms of economic expansion. The pressures of historic anti-Semitism, however, prevented Jews from understanding how they were being used. It also blinded them to the possibility of turning interstitiality into the prophetic function it has always been capable of assuming. In other words, instead of recognizing the role into which they had been cast, Jews played their parts either with gusto, or as in America, with incredible naiveté. George Herbert Mead's concept of the "generalized other" is useful at this juncture. For Mead, society in general forms judgments of individuals or groups. These, in turn, then accept and internalize the judgments to the point where they become part of the social self.² Diaspora Jewry has exhibited an amazing proclivity toward accepting the defining judgments of others, while shunning the task of defining itself.

The classic example of interstitiality has been described for us by the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. Polish Jews in the seventeenth century were prohibited by feudal landlords from owning land, from engaging in banking or the lumber business, for from entering into any area of dominant economic activity. They were, however, encouraged to enter two professions that could only lead to the alienation of the masses: selling liquor and collecting taxes. Many Jews, cut off from other avenues of employment, became agents of the landlord, or *pan*. The "victims" of the tax collectors and liquor merchants were the peasants, or *khlops*, who became accustomed to venting their anger and frustration not upon their true oppressors but upon the highly visible Jews who stood between them and the *pan*. Actually, the number of Jews occupying these marginal roles may have been small, just as the number of Jewish slum landlords in twentieth-century urban America is small, yet they came across to both peasant and *pan* as a third force acting as an intermediate and oppressive agent. "Thus the Ukrainian Jew," Dubnow writes, "found himself between hammer and anvil; between the Pole and the Russian. Three classes, three religions, and three nationalities clashed on a soil, which contained in its bowels terrible volcanic forces -- and a catastrophe was bound to follow."³

What was typical of seventeenth-century life in Poland is also relevant to twentieth-century America. Just as surely as the Jew then was caught between peasant and *pan*, so is he caught today between many forces competing for power: black and white, Catholic and Greek Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, business and labor, blue-collar workers and white-collar workers. In every way, the Jew is interstitial.

Here is a scene we witnessed in a small Tennessee town a few years ago. As a result of state legislation, the local buses had just been integrated. A city statute, however, sought to defy the state and force Negroes to sit only in the rear of the buses. Testing segregation, a few

Negroes sat in the front of the bus and they were arrested. Someone put up the required bail money and they were released. In the lobby of the whites-only hotel in that town, this is what you could hear from more than one patron: "Don't go to Cohen's department store. Cohen is the one who bailed them out." (Alas, Cohen was in the Bahamas at the time and was not involved in any way.) That same day, however, you could walk across the street to Cohen's department store and this is what you would have seen: Negro pickets parading in front of the store with signs reading: "Don't patronize Cohen's department store! Cohen's has a segregated lunch counter."

The saga of Cohen's department store is an example of interstitiality at its most obvious level. Jews can be depicted as the enemy of both parties to a social conflict. But much more important to understand are the subtle ways in which "interstitiality" operates in our society as is actually encouraged by the Jewish establishment.

Hannah Arendt has analyzed the origins of totalitarianism in our times. Her portrayal of the role of the "court Jew" and the consequently declining need for this particular function is but one of the many insights she offers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nation-states found themselves in need of new types of capital, and Jews found themselves welcomed in many European courts. As larger sums were required, however, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, states themselves began to finance their national expansion. Simultaneously, the importance of the Jewish community in this area suffered a noticeable decline. As Arendt points out, it was not because Jews had power that they were hated. On the contrary, it was because their power was declining, and because their wealth appeared to be useless. "As a group," writes Hannah Arendt, "Western Jewry disintegrated together with the nation-state during the decades preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The rapid decline of Europe after the war found them already deprived of their former power, atomized into a herd of wealthy individuals. In an imperialist age, Jewish wealth had become insignificant; to a Europe with no sense of balance of power between its nations and of inter-European solidarity, the non-national, inter-European Jewish element became an object of universal hatred because of its useless wealth and of contempt because of its lack of power."⁴

Failure to understand the interstitial role in which Jews have historically been cast could well lead to renewed persecution and helplessness. An ability to understand it could lead to the creation of real power -- power that is prophetic and just, that saves the oppressed and that gives mission and purpose to Jewish existence. We trust that these words are more than rhetoric. Our civilization needs an independent voice. It needs religious traditions, such as Judaism, that are able to challenge conformity patterns, that are supportive of democracy, and that continually question the improper uses of authority.

With these assumptions underscored, it is now necessary to see how American Jews have become victims and not masters of their interstitial role.

Three seemingly disparate events occurred in 1912, a critically important year in American history. The last of the continental states (exclusive of Alaska) were admitted to the Union; the income tax amendment to the constitution was adopted; and a seemingly insignificant organization was founded in Boston seeking legislation that would end the flow of immigration. In retrospect, these three events are connected. The United States had expanded westward as

afar as it could go. With the admission of Arizona and New Mexico, the frontier era of U.S. history was coming to its end and with the end of this epoch came the fear that American geographical and commercial explosion would too. The income tax was seen as a means of generating funds that the nation would now need in order to conduct its business. Fears about the ability of American to sustain its economic and geographic expansion also spurred the conviction that it was no time to limit the immigration of foreigners and particularly of Jews. That was what the Immigration Restriction League set out to do.

The Immigration Laws of 1923 curtailed the admission of Jews as well as other "less desirable" immigrants to this country. It did not stop French or English immigration. It did stop the Jews as well as immigrants from many areas of the world whose presence could be deemed inimical to the American way of life.

In an odd way, Jews abetted this process, despite their official protestations. Writing to the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1892, Jacob Schiff advised the Alliance to send new immigrants directly to San Francisco rather than to New York. "While there too, the Russians are not wanted; if they come, they will be taken care of."⁵

This pattern had been seen before. Jews of Berlin at the end of the eighteenth century felt threatened by the immigration of East European Jews, and Jews in Marseilles resented the giving of citizenship to the Jews of Alsace,. So did many Jews in the United States accommodate by word and deed those members of the power structure who felt that the time had come to limit the number of Jewish immigrants to this country. The board of Managers of the Associated Hebrew Charities of Chicago, for example, passed a resolution in 1886 condemning the "transportation of paupers into this country and Canada by European societies....all such as are unable to maintain themselves should be forthwith returned whence they came."⁶

What is significant here is how often the Jewish community responded to the forces that were structuring it in a negatively interstitial role, not by fighting those forces, but by cooperating with them. Of course, not all American-born Jews adopted a policy hostile toward immigrants. It is true that the official pronouncements of Jewish agencies have traditionally favored liberalizing immigration laws but one wonders at the degree of support given to their positions. All too often, Jews allowed their spokesman to be those who would be most tractable and responsive to the interests of the non-Jewish power structure. Even during the Hitler years, muted Jewish voices could be read as tacitly accepting restrictions to immigrants by those who feared the mongrelization of America. A distinction must be drawn between the isolated voices of hatred and the established social powers that purport to fight prejudice but do so only up to the moment that their own power becomes threatened.

It is essential for Jews to understand the difference between institutional anti-Semitism and individual anti-Semitism. They need to understand that the "outside" forces dominating Jewish life operate independently of "bad" people. These forces have a reality that transcends individual action. Our defense agencies have failed to understand this truth and have preferred instead to concentrate on "bad" people, or on pattern so individual prejudice expressed by authoritarian personalities.

What vast sums of money are spent by the Jewish community of the United States to fight George Lincoln Rockwell types! What tremendous sums of energy are spent agonizing over an anti-Semitic statement by a provocative black leader of fundamentalist preacher! These are both misleading analogies. Images of the Holocaust are inevitably invoked by any expression of anti-Semitism but there are tremendous dangers here. In the first place, individual anti-Semites, when divorced from the larger social fabric of which they are a part, invite false comparison to Nazi Germany. In the second place, anti-Semitism on the part of a minority group is not nearly as dangerous as when a majority group seizes upon it as a way of maintaining power.

Much more needs to be said on the subject of anti-Semitism. It is a social instrument that is often misused. Several years ago, striking Jewish teachers in New York City were not above invoking images of anti-Semitism as a way of forcing group solidarity within their own ranks. Anti-Jewish statements by a few black speakers were given wide circulation by the striking teachers seeking Jewish support for their cause.

The fear of anti-Semitism has often been utilized by respectable Jewish agencies to maintain their preeminence and to garner support for their programs. That fear has produced large contributions and a prosperous "Jewish defense industry."

But while this process goes on, the more threatening aspects of anti-Semitism go unattended. What the Jewish community has to fear most is a severe economic depression similar to the one that affected Germany in the 1920s and '30s, a major conflict between social classes, and an inability to escape from the negative dimensions of interstitiality.

That depressions pose a threat to Jews hardly need be labored. The Jewish community suffers when an economic crisis occurs. The decline of Spain as a result of the bloody clashes between the Muslims and Christians led to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Hitler's rise in response to a seemingly insoluble financial crisis was accompanied by prompt action to direct the anger of the people away from the government and on to the incredulous Jews of Germany. The great depression in the United States was accompanied by all kinds of anti-Semitic activity, including the renaissance of the Ku Klux Klan, the bitter tirades of Father Coughlin, and the publication by Henry Ford and the Dearborn Press of numerous anti-Jewish tracts.

The racial crisis in America threatens Jews not because a few black militants may say some unkind words about Jews. Rather it is threatening because of a Jewish failure to recognize the interstitial role and because the Jewish community remains unable to deal with the few marginal Jews who play a negative role in the ghettos of our cities. Jewish institutions that remain in our inner cities--institutions such as hospitals and social agencies--are vulnerable to the charge that they play manipulative roles in the Negro community. But the greatest threat lies in the ways the white power structure may respond to black social unrest at some future time when it finds itself unable to cope with this growing disparity between the races. Turning the Jews over to the mob may be as entertaining as turning Christians over to the lions--and much more contemporaneous.

While Jews worry about black anti-Semitism, white power structures use this fear to carry out one other aspect of the negative interstitial pattern. As Hannah Arendt points out in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Jews have traditionally relied on the power structure rather than the masses for protection. Traditionally, they have relied upon the support of a few power elites rather than upon the understanding of the masses. This syndrome can be documented in countless crises in Jewish history, ranging back to the eleventh-century relationship between Samuel Ibn Hanagid and the Granada court of King Habus forward to the function of Jewish politicians in twentieth-century America. This syndrome extracts its price from the Jewish community.

While Jews have gained access to many areas of economic activity that were once closed to them, they still face a curtain excluding them from many spheres. Jews do not belong to the key social clubs in which basic decisions are made about the future of our cities. Jews are significantly absent in the management of the giant utilities and insurance companies. They sell a great deal of insurance, of course, but they do not share in the basic decisions as to where resources shall be placed. In 1967, when this essay began, Morris B. Abram reported that of the 50 largest banks in the United States, "45 of them do not have one single solitary Jew in a senior management position. But, you may say, that there are Jews in the pipeline to senior management. Of these 50 banks, 38 of them had no jobs for Jews in middle management. And, in fact, while in senior management the percentage of Jews was 1.1 percent of the total." Abram concluded that in view of the fact that 8 percent of American college graduates from whom these employees are drawn are Jewish, and 15 percent of Ivy League college graduates from whom recruiters prefer to draw top management personnel are Jewish; the discrimination is obvious.⁷

Although opportunities in any one area may change from decade to decade, it remains important to pay special attention to those commercial activities from which Jews are excluded. Utilities and the petroleum industry are two that come quickly to mind. It is fascinating and frightening for this writer to sit on a board composed of the presidents of the utilities, the banks, and the insurance companies and to hear a report presented (not for discussion but simply for information), which outlines the neighborhoods of Chicago that will be opened for experimental integrated living. All of them are Jewish. Yet, in none of these decisions was the Jewish community involved.

The point is not to suggest that integrated living is less than a desirable goal. It is rather to document ways in which basic decisions are made without Jewish participation in the process. Jews do not respond with violence when Negroes move into Jewish areas. This may be one reason that Jewish communities are often target areas for integrated living. That Jews have historically recognized the right of every person to live wherever he chooses may well be a source of satisfaction.

The slum landlord, the contract seller, the ghetto merchant, the Jewish politician in an all-black area may be the marginal remainders of what was a once-proud Jewish community. Nevertheless, their presence in slum areas is a reality to which we cannot close our eyes. These are the men who play the interstitial role with the most heavy hand. They are in a position where they may emerge not as marginal, but as characteristic. It is doubtful whether anyone will every question how a telephone company or a heating utility exploits poor people by tempting them to

spend more money than they should on inadequate service. But a Jewish ghetto merchant, despite his own conceptualization of his role, is almost invariably placed in a position where his business ethics will be questioned because of the prices or interest he charges or because of the temptations he places before his customers.

The exploiting done by utilities is much more pervasive as a result of the temptations they place before minority groups. Coupled with their poor record of investment in ghetto personnel and resources, they will not be attacked. They will not be attacked because their position is not marginal and their power is not vulnerable. Several years ago one of our utilities conducted a study aimed at determining how much it takes out of various ethnic and racial communities in terms of income and how much it returns in terms of salaries. The difference between what is returned to the white community and what is returned to the black community is an astounding tale of discrimination against blacks. And yet, the utilities will not be attacked by the black community; Jews, however, will be attacked--unless the interstitial role can be understood.

The point is that strong power structures are remarkably immune to criticism compared with the Jews, whose role is more visible and whose motives can be easily distorted. Thus, the Jewish widow left with property in a changing neighborhood as her sole source of income may suddenly find herself attacked as a slum landlord. The merchant who pictures himself as a hero for remaining in a neighborhood that has changed from white to black, who feels that he performs a humanitarian function in providing credit to those who are poor risks, emerges in the public eye as a credit gouger and a thief.

Yet, the slum landlord and the ghetto merchant--few as they may be in number--are characteristic symbols of the negative interstitial role. They remain in our inner cities after Jewish institutions leave and after Jews have moved to the security of their all too segregated suburbs.

A priority for the Jewish community to counteract this activity would be to provide a positive Jewish presence to a wide variety of inner city neighborhoods, both white and black. Providing staff members and resource people to help deal with schools, with inner-city residents, with urban renewal, with consumer practices, and with a thousand other community issues is the pathway into a relationship in which interstitiality becomes a meaningful and positive thing. Such a project has now been undertaken and its initial successes have been more than encouraging.

In the meantime, those few Jews who are indeed exploitative must be prohibited from causing damage both to the people they exploit and to a Jewish community that will be the victim of the whirlwind they are sowing. Surely there will be those who rebel at this point and ask, What is exploitative and what is normative? Aren't there laws adequate to deal with this exploitation? The question presupposes a Jewish community that is both insensitive and powerless. Our response is that Jews certainly are not insensitive nor need they be morally powerless. As a community we can study the issues, learn the facts, and make the decisions that are prophetic and not merely expedient. When this process can take place, then Judaism will

indeed be relevant to the twentieth century; then we will have turned the interstitial role from a negative into a positive.

The importance of these suggestions becomes even more apparent when viewed in the light of contemporary anti-Semitism. A reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* shows how far anti-Semitism has moved out of its theological cradle. Hitler spoke of the Jews not as Christ killers, but as morally unfit. The stereotype of the credit merchant or the slum landlord, of course, encourages a general picture of Jews as an "unfit people." It is easy to suggest that these stereotypes ought to be ignored because they are fabrications of sick minds. The truth is that the inability to counter these stereotypes with effective action and prophetic concern can be fatal. "As far as the Jews were concerned," writes Hannah Arendt, "the transformation of the 'crime' of Judaism into the fashionable 'vice' of Jewishness was dangerous in the extreme. Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness there was no escape. A crime, moreover, is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated."⁸

It would be nice, of course, if all people could understand that Jews are individuals, and that they are capable of resisting the social roles that all too often have been assigned to them. Good and bad, tough and soft, brilliant successes and dismal failures, we Jews are as disparate as any of God's children. Theodore Roosevelt seemed to be trying to say this when he rebuked the humorist Arthur Train for the way he had described Jews in a magazine article. "That was an admirable story of yours in the current *McClure's*," Roosevelt wrote. "Will you however permit me a criticism, not in reference to this story, but to the other stories that should go with it. In this story there is a native American scoundrel, which is all right. There is also a meaner Jew scoundrel, which is also all right. But there are native American representatives of manliness and decency; and there also ought to be a Jew among them! It is very important that we shall not give the impression that we are attacking all foreigners qua foreigners. There are exceedingly bad Jews, and exceedingly bad old-stock native Americans. There are exceedingly good men who are Jews, and other exceedingly good men who are native old-stock Americans.... I hope you will make the emphasis with all possible insistence as between all men who are good Americans, and all who are bad Americans; and that you will be careful to see that your readers clearly understand that there are Jews and Gentiles...on both sides."⁹

While it remains as important as ever for Roosevelt's insight to be shared with all people, it is particularly important that Jews themselves understand what Roosevelt was saying. In any oppressed people self-hatred is an inscrutable problem. The persecution of Jews over the centuries has produced an intensity of self-hatred that is searing. In much of contemporary Jewish literature particularly this form of self-hatred becomes apparent.

We cannot tell writers what to write, nor believers what to believe. We can only suggest that the roles that have been assigned to us transcend our individualism and seek us out whether we like it or not. For those who wish to identify with a tradition that is ancient and great, a tremendous task becomes quite apparent. The survival of mankind needs the presence of a people that is truly interstitial, that rises above nationalism and parochialism and is concerned with moral issues and with the pursuit of justice. The task before us is to understand the relationship of Judaism to the larger society in which Jews live. It is to deal courageously with

the judgmental forces of that society. It is to be relevant and prophetic. It is to accept Isaiah's affirmation: "Here am I. Send me."

¹ Quoted in Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, p. 23.

² George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 154.

³ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Vol. 1, p. 142.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part One, p. 15.

⁵ Quoted in Robert J. Marx, "Changing Religious Patterns of Reform Religious Leadership, 1890-1957," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University), p. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁷ Proceedings of the Workshop on Equal Employment Opportunities, sponsored by the American Bankers Association, New York, September 26, 1967, p. 11.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part One, p. 87.

⁹ Quoted in E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment*, p. 152.